DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 893 IR 056 712

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TITLE Interweaving Face-to-Face Student Contact with an Online Class Presentation Format.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper contributed to the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference, "Trends and Issues in Online Instruction" (2nd, Kapiolani Community College, April 1-3, 1997).
AVAILABLE FROM http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcc conf97/
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Computer Mediated Communication; Conventional Instruction; Educational Strategies; Electronic Mail; Higher Education; *Interaction; *Interpersonal Relationship; Learning Theories; Nontraditional Education; *Online Systems; Student Attitudes; Telecommunications
IDENTIFIERS *University of Hawaii Manoa

ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates ways to combine online conference participation with face-to-face meetings and other social supports to humanize asynchronous electronic communications in an applied organizational communication class offered through the University of Hawaii at Manoa Communications Department. The overall methodology and intent of this course is to emphasize the role and benefits of students exploring their own attitudes and values as ascertained from the textbook assignments and from reading what their colleagues think about the academic lessons. Specific strategies for incorporating face-to-face contact in the online environment include: face-to-face class meeting at the start of the term; posting of digital photographs; identifying computer literate students to help others with questions; a face-to-face meeting mid-way through the term; group projects; face-to-face meeting for group presentations; and final course evaluation surveys. Asynchronous electronic communication, such as online conferences and e-mail, supplemented by in-person orientations and follow-up meetings, bridges the gap between the "high tech" and "high touch" for students. (AEF)

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ED 413 893

2nd Annual

Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference

Trends and Issues in Online Instruction

April 1-3, 1997

Sponsored by Kapi'olani Community College

"Interweaving Face-to-Face Student Contact with an Online Class Presentation Format"

by

Jan-Michelle Sawyer, MA University of Hawaii-Manoa.

This presentation shares ways to combine online conference participation with face-to-face meetings and other social supports to humanize asynchronous electronic communications in an applied organizational communication class. Active learning through thoughtful participation with others and involvement in one's own learning process are enhanced by access to a mix of learning modes that fit a student's style. Outcomes include increased motivation and engagement in distance education classes through building community, and improved Internet skills through shared learning.

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Personal Bio:
Ms Sawyer teaches a course at the University of Hawaii entitled: Applied Organizational Communication, all online. The focus of this course is to apply communication theory with "real-world" practical experiences. Her areas of specialization are intercultural communication, communication practices and distance learning via the computer. Ms Sawyer is also an accomplished and acclaimed sculptor whose recent works of Gabby "Pops" Pahinui (Hawaiian musician) will be on permanent display in downtown Honolulu. For those interested in checking out her sculptural interests please click to:
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Ms Sawyer has authored numerous articles on marketing and strategic planning and is the recipient of several awards acknowledging her work in marketing, communication and strategic planning practices pertaining to the health care industry.

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INTERWEAVING FACE-TO-FACE STUDENT CONTACT WITH AN ONLINE CLASS PRESENTATION FORMAT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share ways to humanize asynchronous electronic communication in an applied organizational communication class as a model of mixed-mode instruction.

This is an age of transformation, of continual re-engineering, restructuring and re-inventing organizations and institutions. There is an obvious growing need for information to be accessible and for communication to be enhanced. The work of educators in this decade is the work of transforming schools so that patterns of teaching and learning reflect the spirit of inquiry that is the basis for all science.

Education has become a necessity and our school systems are turning to the information superhighway to provide interactive dimensions of learning. So long as teachers remain "instructors"--isolated both physically in their individual classrooms and intellectually in their individual disciplines--and the school day remains a loose collection of fragmented 50-minute periods of instructional units, there will be little or no change in the learning environments or learning outcomes.

ACTIVE LEARNING VIA DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is a way of educating students in a non-traditional class format that is interactive, although the instructor is not physically there, as in the classroom setting. Distance education is revolutionizing the way students are being educated and it will have a direct impact in restructuring our current educational system (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Active learning is a concept that involves ways to increase the student's involvement in his/her own learning process. Educators who have latched onto the practice of teaching classes through the internet are learning that this computer-facilitated methodology is promoting the effectiveness of teaching as well as the overall long-term effectiveness of student learning and retention.

Analysis of the research literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) suggests that students must do more than just listen to the teacher who is lecturing on a subject: they must read, write, discuss and engage in solving problems of exploring ideas. This suggests that students best benefit from their educational experience when they are engaged in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. In other words, reading, writing and reflecting upon what the instructor and other students have written online could have a powerful impact upon the students' overall learning. Educators are finding that students prefer strategies promoting active learning to traditional lectures.

APPLIED COMMUNICATIONS COURSE EXAMPLE

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In an online class that is currently being offered through the University of Hawaii at Manoa Communications Department, face-to-face techniques are being utilized successfully in a 400-level course entitled: Applied Organizational Communication. The focus of this course is to pull together theoretical concepts of communication practices into "real-world" settings or applications. The class is presented online utilizing conference areas on a service called MetaNet (The Meta Network), located in Virginia, whose specialty is designing online educational classroom environments. All students in the applied communications course attend an initial face-to-face orientation meeting during the first week of the school term. Specific online techniques are covered face-to-face during the second week, after which students are expected to be fully immersed in the online environment. (For more information about MetaNet's online classroom formats, please refer to http://www.tmn.com)

The overall methodology and intent of this course is to emphasize the role and benefits of students exploring their own attitudes and values as ascertained from the textbook assignments and from reading what their colleagues think about the academic lessons. Students who might otherwise sit in a face-to-face classroom and never utter one word find that there is more room for expression by writing in the virtual classroom folders about their ideas, values, and reactions to the subject matter. Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information (instructor lecture) and more on developing student skills, such as writing, reading comprehension, and articulating (in writing) what the student is learning about him/herself.

The online virtual classroom moves the student into higher-order thinking, such as critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The novelty of taking a class over the Internet also offers a new way to capture students' imaginations, while fertilizing a deeper exploration of their own attitudes and values. Finally, students seem to become more pro-active and engaged in the course curriculum work, as they themselves take on a role of contributing to the course content.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In the Beginning:

The class needs to meet face-to-face at the start of the term, an opportunity where students can meet the instructor, get the course syllabus, find out all the particulars and make contact with other students. For an online class of 13 weeks, it is recommended that at least three to four class meetings be held at the beginning of the term face-to-face. During this time students are introduced to the online medium, shown how to navigate through electronic classroom virtual folders, and shown how to implement computer skills and technology utilizing their home or school computer.

Digital Photographs:

Photographs of each student and the instructor are taken using a digital camera. These individual photographs are uploaded by each student into an area where they post their photo plus a short description about who they are, their ethnic background, their goals and interests online during the first month of class. This is also an opportunity for students to get to know one another casually online

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and to experiment with the medium. Viewing the digital photographs online helps everyone to place a face to a name.

Identification of individuals is especially helpful so that if the instructor sees a student on campus, she will readily recognize that student and communicate an acknowledgment of some sort. Uploading student photos and bio-data on the Internet encourages students to experiment with writing about themselves, while engaging in informal communications with other students.

Student Expertise:

It is very helpful to identify two to three students who are computer literate and who can help other students with computer questions. Examples of student expertise have included their knowing how to upload digital photographs or a file, maneuver through the online environment, and offer practical answers to general questions about the online environment. Students sometimes feel more comfortable asking another student about how to do something, than they would in asking the instructor. Students who are helpful also benefit by developing skills in giving instructions clearly and in being helpful to others.

Mid-Way Through the Term:

Halfway through the school term, it is highly recommend that the entire class meet face-to-face for at least two classroom meetings. This allows an opportunity to catch up, ask questions, refocus on names and faces and generally re-group. At this time it is recommended that an evaluation of the course be handed out to the students. Solving problems is best handled when the instructor can identify problem areas from student feedback as early as possible.

Group Projects:

Another way to increase the success ratio of conducting a class online is to break the class into working groups, in which they participate in a group assignment or project. Working groups of five to six people meet as a group twice face-to-face. They are then instructed to conduct the remainder of their group assignment by email and online. This exercise replicates a real-world challenge where individuals have to plan and coordinate materials via e-mail and then meet in person to actually do their presentation before a live audience.

Face-to-Face at the Time of Group Presentations:

A method of bringing the online class back into a visual context is for student work groups to present their assigned research tasks in the classroom to their colleagues face-to-face. While the majority of their planning was done online, their true test of implementing real-world challenges is during such a classroom meeting. In addition, the groups then make their presentations in their "working folders" on-line. This exercise allows students to combine face-to-face with online practical experience.

Final Course Evaluations:

Students fill out a confidential course evaluation survey, which is e-mailed to the instructor. Items include their satisfaction with the course, with the mixed method of instruction, with the instructor's assignments and style of interaction.

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ROLES OF ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE OVERALL ONLINE EXPERIENCE

The advantage of offering a course through the Internet is that students can visit their classroom site at any time of the day or night. Posting requires that they think about what they want to say. Students then become active learners and also discover subtle things about how they feel about a subject or what another student posted. It appears that students are demonstrating a deeper grasp of curriculum material when they are required to post their assignments to questions at a minimum of twice a week. While the asynchronous format allows for flexibility for the student and teacher, specific guidelines and requirements for assignments should be clearly defined and communicated to the class at the beginning of the term.

When students are instructed to respond to their classmates' writings and reflections, this requirement appears to engage them in interacting more thoughtfully with their colleagues. In other words, it is not enough just for the instructor to post a comment back to a student's reflection. The learning actually seems to be deeper when each student receives a response from another student. Accountability is higher because students do not want to "lose face" with other students. Peer accountability and cooperation is higher among students in an online environment that has practiced ongoing community building.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE TEACHING

It is desirable to use a mix of interaction including face-to-face, small group collaboration via e-mail, and individual postings in the electronic classroom space, especially in a communications class where social context is important. The main weakness of many online programs is that there is only one medium (e.g., only e-mail, bulletin boards, or electronic conferences) with little human support. Not everyone feels comfortable going into a new medium "cold." A solid grounding with face-to-face orientation sessions where students can meet each other and be shown how to use the media is crucial, followed up with additional face-to-face sessions at times of transition.

The availability of an online classroom 24 hours a day is a motivating factor for students desiring flexibility and reflection time to prepare assignments. Social reinforcement and validation from both peers and instructor create a collaborative, self-organizing communication system that welcomes all to participate.

Norms of participation and other expectations are best designed collaboratively, with the instructor's facilitation of the course syllabus. The instructor, together with students who are comfortable with the new media, plays a critical part in modeling desired behavior for participants, showing examples, experience, and creative ways to get started. As students experiment, some innovative results will recreate new norms for the course, reinforced by peers and instructor as appropriate.

A creative, enthusiastic instructor knowledgeable in online techniques and experienced in various ways of presenting the subject matter is desirable in the online environment, which is continually changing. The use of student experts as demonstrators and tech-helpers leverages and helps keep the entire group in contact.

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SUMMARY

As distance education evolves, attention is continually being paid to what works well in connecting people with technology. Asynchronous electronic communication, such as online conferences and e-mail, supplemented by face-to-face orientations and follow-up meetings, bridges the gap between "high tech" and "high touch" for students in an applied communications course at the University of Hawaii.

Digital photographs, social interaction, student experts, group projects, and face-to-face group presentations strengthen both communication skills and community building. Students exploring their own attitudes and values based on text readings and assignments are encouraged to participate frequently using a variety of modes, which enables them to prepare their work, reflect, exchange feedback, and give/receive social support, all of which reinforce the course content, elevate higher-order thinking, and encourage individual expression.

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